

Our nineteenth century forefathers held the more or less articulate belief in the utility of the things, the forces and the situations that compose the world. This is one of the aspects by which we distinguish ourselves from them. It is, however, important for the purpose of the present paper to analyze what sort of utilitarian belief went lost in the course of the revolutions and upheavals that separate us from them. Although their belief in utility had certainly very little in common with the previous faith in an overall wisdom or design that governs the world, it is still too easy to reduce their belief to some sort of instrumentalism or pragmatism, and call it "bourgeois" in such a shallow sense of the term. No doubt: the industrial revolution and the brutally experimental method of trial and error which followed it did provoke in many such a tendency toward a pragmatic theory of knowledge and ethical vision. But I do not think that at bottom the concept and value of utility stem from such a mechanistic, or even biological, context. It is true, of course, that in the course of the nineteenth century it became ever more problematic to distinguish between mechanisms and organisms as the functional and structural similarities between the two became ever more obvious, and that in that way it became unavoidable to see organisms like animals as a kind of machines, and mechanisms like the State as a kind of organisms. Thus instrumentalism and pragmatism had, during the nineteenth century, both a mechanistic and a vitalistic flavor, and the term "utility" had to do both with mechanical efficiency and with biological fitness. Still: "utility" both as a concept and as a value seem to me to be the result of a specific ontology prior to the industrial revolution, one which somehow equates use with being. Not in the obviously bourgeois sense that what is may be used, but in the more radical sense that to be used is to be. It is the belief in such an ontology which went lost, and this merits consideration.

It is difficult for us who no longer see any utility in the world, and who, quite to the contrary, consider the futility and absurdity of everything except the human artifact to be the essence of "nature", to reconstitute such an ontology, and distinguish it from previous ones, for which the world as a whole was a sort of artifact, a "creation". We may, however, intuit some of it by taking concrete examples. For the Christian ontologies prior to the utilitarian belief each phenomenon had, so to speak, its own justification for being, and justified itself, additionally, through the orderly relationship it maintained with its surroundings. Thus the Sun was justified for being what it is by being it, and also by the part it played in the scheme of heavenly bodies, (whatever the astronomy of the day). And the mouse was justified for being what it is by being it, and also for the part it played in the economy of life of which Man was the ultimate justification. For nineteenth century ontology however, the question of justification or apology of nature had become meaningless, and the phenomena became explain-

2

able as functions of past causes, and as causes for future functions. Thus the Sun was explained as a specific stage of a galactic process, and the mouse as a specific stage of a biological process. But such an explanation involved the idea of utility in the sense of function within a specific process. The Sun, being a function of the galactic process, is "useful" within the process, and so is the mouse within the biological process. In fact, if they were not useful thus, they would not be, and their being useful is their form of being. It is possible to state this difference between earlier and nineteenth century ontologies as follows: Christian ontologies conceive of the world teleologically, (they ask: "for what purpose?"), and nineteenth century ontology explains the world causally, (it asks: "~~for what why?~~"<sup>"why?"</sup>)

Now it may be shown that such a causal, diachronical, historical ontology, which seizes Being as Becoming, is the expression of a very specific being-in-the-world. He who states that to be is to become, in fact believes, consciously or subliminally, that to be is to be used, and this belief is the form in which he is in the world. Most of the nineteenth century philosophical and scientific systems, the Hegelian like the Schopenhauerian, the Marxist like the Nietzschean, the Darwinian like the physico-chemical, may be shown to be variations of this very deep belief in the utility of everything that happens. To be sure: in a very specific utility, namely a functional one, not one of transcendent purpose. Such a type of utility may be called one of survival, and it may be said that within such a belief to be means to have been useful for survival. Those who held that belief, (however they might have expressed it consciously), were under the impression that they have lost the faith of their fathers. Since the world had no purpose for them, and since it could not be justified, only explained, it appeared to them to be a world in which there is no place left for faith as a form of being-in-it. But we, who have lost the belief in any type of utility of the world, can now see, with the wisdom of hindsight, that it is not so and that our nineteenth century forefathers were still within Christian tradition. Because their belief in the utility for survival, (in the very broad sense here intended, not in the Darwinian sense), is still a form of seeing a meaning, although not a purpose, in the events of the world. It is this belief in the utility for survival as meaning that went lost somewhere between Kafka and the technological apparatus.

The strange thing about this ontology is however this: it injects a type of utility into the realm of culture which to us seems to be curiously inappropriate to it. We are inclined to believe that what distinguishes nature from culture is precisely the fact that the things of culture, but not of nature, are useful, and that the utility of those things is precisely what renders them cultural, (namely "artificial"). But our forefathers held the belief that culture itself may be explained as the result of a nat

ural process, and that culture is useful as a function within the process of human survival. Such a view upon culture, which blurs the limits between culture and nature, between spirit and matter, by explaining the one from the other, falsifies, from our own point of view, the very essence of culture and of the "spirit". This shows how profoundly materialistic the nineteenth century was, if compared to our own being-in-the-world, and also how profoundly religious. It was materialistic, whatever its articulate system in the sense of seeing utility in everything, and one may call this the "bourgeois materialism", whether it calls itself vitalism, empiro-criticism, positivism, or dialectical idealism or materialism. And it was religious, whatever its articulate profession, in the sense of believing in utility of everything, and one may call this the "bourgeois religion", whether it call itself atheistic, agnostic or whatever. This bourgeois materialistic religion, this profound belief that to be is to be used, that utility is the foundation of being, is what went lost, and in this sense we are no longer bourgeois: we may still act and behave like bourgeois, but we no longer believe in our thus acting and behaving.

He who holds that culture is useful in such a bourgeois sense, that it is a sort of space suit in which mankind survives in the process of its travel through the bottomless pit called "world"; is committed to culture in a way we can no longer intuit. His is not a commitment for the sake of culture, but to culture for the sake of survival. He will not admit consciously, of course, that it is to survival, to the continuation of a purposeless process, that he is committed. Instead of survival, he may say Man, or Life, or Progress, and the fact that such names may be substituted for each other without changing the commitment shows that the materialistic religion of utility is both mechanistic and vitalistic. What matters is that for such a belief culture has a meaning, namely the process for which it is useful. That process again has a meaning, because it is useful for something else, which again is useful for something. Since there is no ultimate meaning in such an ontology, since everything is useful for something in infinite progression, there is no place for metaphysics in it, unless utility itself be considered the metaphysical ground for all being. And since this belief marks nineteenth century commitment to culture, it marks nineteenth century culture, which, to a great extent, is still ours. And since we have lost the belief, but not the culture, we live in a culture we no longer believe in. It is in this context of ours that I want to ask the question which is the title of the present paper: "How important is art for survival?". It becomes, in such a context, an ironical question, if by "irony" we understand a specific kind of transcendence.

Those of us who are committed to culture in general, and to art in particular, no longer believe, if they are honest, that they are com-

mitted to anything useful. They no longer believe that the culture, and more specifically the art they are committed to has a meaning. In fact, the very idea of utility and of having a meaning has become somehow fluid and no longer expresses an ontological ground, but rather specific relations. Since we no longer believe in a fundamental utility and meaning of the phenomena composing the world, those have become relative terms characteristic of specific situations. If we are committed to culture, and more specifically to art, it is because we intend thus to impose a utility and a meaning on phenomena which are essentially futile. And we do so, in order to render our life relatively useful and meaningful, a life of which we are convinced that it is essentially futile. Thus culture, and especially art, are for us fundamentally absurd enterprises, in the sense of being efforts to render useful and meaningful what is essentially futile. This attitude of ours toward culture and art is entirely different from our forefathers' attitude in that it does not assume culture and art to be important for survival, but important as methods, strategies, games, (or whatever the formalistic term we might chose), to pass the time of surviving. The theories by which we explain culture and our commitment to it can therefore no longer be mechanistic, biological, psychological or sociological ones, as they were in the time of our fathers. If we do try to explain culture and our commitment to it, (and one of our characteristics is that we are tired of explanations), we must therefore take recourse to theories like those of games, of information, of cybernetics. For us culture and our commitment to it is no longer an ontological or existential, but a formal problem. Which means that we are no longer, as were our forefathers, committed to survival, but that we are survivors in the sense outsketched in the first paragraph of the present paper.

The fact that we commit ourselves to art as one of the methods to pass our time during our survival confers on our commitment that ironical transcendence which I mentioned somewhat earlier. And an ironical commitment is not a true one: a part of ourselves stands outside and watches the other part in commitment. Now it can be said, of course, that such a dialectics of consciousness is always characteristic of human existence. Nonetheless it is true that that the loss of belief we have suffered has rendered that dialectics much more evident and effective than before, and that in that sense we are more conscious and self-conscious than were our fathers. To be a survivor implies such a wide-awake consciousness. And it is within that painful, destructive and self-destructive clearness that the question of the importance of art for survival arises. Although there may be no such thing as a naive art, never to my knowledge did there exist a situation as ours, where art is art about art, and therefore a technical enterprise in the broad and the strict sense of that term.

The term "art", as used ever since the Renaissance until quite recently, means an activity by which specific materials are manipulated to become "beautiful". In earlier times the word "art" did not have that meaning, because no such activity existed. Of course; ever since man is man, he manufactures "beautiful things", and it may be said that to surround himself with "beauty" is one of his characteristics. Necessarily so, because whatever he touches becomes "beautiful" in the sense of: informed by his spirit. But the beauty of artifacts, as opposed to the beauty of works of art, is not their purpose. It is a necessary, and wellcome, aspect of their purpose, which is to be "good for something". Arrows are beautiful, because they are good for hunting, music is beautiful because it is good for dancing, ships are beautiful because they are good for sailing, philosophy is beautiful because it is good for the soul and government is beautiful if it is good for the city. The term "artifact", as opposed to the term "work of art", is a reminder of the meaning the word "art" had before it assumed its modern connotation. The "art" of the arrow-smith, the musician, the shipbuilder, the philosopher or the governor was an activity by which specific materials were manipulated to become "good" for something, and that goodness was, phenomenologically, their beauty. If an arrow was not beautiful, it was no good for hunting. Now this is not a "functional" attitude toward beauty: a thing is beautiful if it works. On the contrary: it is beautiful because it works. Not functionalism or pragmatism, but ~~kallo~~kallogathia. The inseparable interrelation between goodness and beauty.

An important aspect of the revolution by which the bourgeois assumed power and created modern civilisation is the separation of beauty from goodness. Not everything that is good is necessarily beautiful, and it may be ugly. (Like the uniforms in Victorian hospitals, or the industrial suburbs.) And not everything that is beautiful is necessarily good, and it may be sinful. (Like some philosophical systems, or the naked body). There is an ambivalence in this distinction which the early protestants must have felt, and which exploded in the form of Romanticism. One can now choose between beauty and goodness. Between a life dedicated to beauty, (the "Artist" with a capital A), and a life dedicated to goodness, (first the Reformer, then the businessman and the scientist, and at last the technocrat and the revolutionary politician). At the culminating stage of this mutual alienation of goodness and beauty, the Artist stands beyond good and evil, and the technician despises the niceties of mere human existence. But of course such raving lunacy, (characteristic of the victorious and Victorian bourgeois), cannot persist for long, and attempts are made to "re-unite" goodness and beauty. The "fine Arts" condescend to be applied, and technology condescends to be designed. In other words the artist becomes committed, and the politician becomes existentially authentic. But the unseparable unity between goodness and beauty cannot be achieved through such synthetical efforts. Not through applied art and in-

dustrial design, nor through avant-garde art and a Ministry of Culture. Be cause that unity is not a synthesis between, for instance, the arts and the sciences, or between art and politics, but is previous to such distinctions. Art in the modern sense of the term, and science, and politics, (and for that matter philosophy and religion), are aspects of that unity of beauty and goodness. Which is, in itself, the "supreme" art, or science, or politics, namely the "art of living and dying". And that is the lost meaning of the term "art". It cannot be reconstituted.

But although it cannot be reconstituted, it can, to some extent, be unearthed from below the deep layers of garbage accumulated during the last five hundred years, (and which is called "progress"). And the confrontation with this lost meaning of "art" is sufficient to destroy the modern meaning of the term. Thus we cannot reconstitute the old and full meaning of the word "art", because we no longer know the activity it meant: the art of living and dying, and we cannot continue to use the word in its modern meaning, because the activity meant by the word is rendered absurd through the rediscovery of the old meaning. The word "art" has thus lost its meaning for us, and it would be wiser if we no longer used it. But, curiously enough: words are not things that can be picked up or dropped at will, as if they were pebbles at our disposal. We use them, to be sure, but they use us, and we change them, to be sure, but they change us. In this words are like all other tools, only more so. We believe, with regard to all our tools, that we may use them freely, but on consideration we must confess that we are also used by them. With words this is even more complex. Because words are not only around us, but also within us. They chose us at least as much as we chose them. We might, for instance, come to the conclusion that the word "nature" has no longer any meaning. But it does not allow us to drop it. We are obliged to give it a new meaning. And the same applies to the word "art", (which is, of course, in some sense the opposite of "nature"). We cannot drop it, it does not allow us to do so. So we are now, more or less in spite of ourselves, trying to give that word a new meaning.

Now this is a rather unusual gesture: we hold a word in our hand which has become "empty", (devoid of meaning), and we look for something to "fill it". The gesture is unusual, because we are tempted to believe that everything around us already has a name, and therefore that to look for something nameless to call it "art" is slightly silly. But of course, this is not so. On the contrary: the moment we look around us in search of something nameless, all the names covering our world seem to evaporate, and leave a totally nameless soup within which we swim, ourselves namelessly, and without any orientation. It seems that names cannot withstand to be looked at, only to be looked through. They are meant to cover things, not to be lifted. Naming is an activity which solidifies, and thus "produces" things out of the soup, but un-naming, or dis-naming, is an activity which has no name, as yet.

Why not call that activity "art", since, after all, it is the first nameless thing that strikes us in our search for a new meaning of that term? Why not say: let "art" mean that activity by which names are lifted from things so that they may be discovered as things? Such a use of the term "art" would not only correspond to our gesture of looking for a new meaning of the term, but also to a ever more common tendency in general usage. There is no coincidence to the two reasons why one should employ the word "art" with this new meaning. "Art" now tends to mean the activity of lifting names from things, because that activity has no other name, and it has no other name, because the modern activity called "art" previously has lost its meaning and is being substituted by the new one. In other words: the term "art" stands relatively still, and its various meanings flow through it. The meaning "to make beautiful things" is about to leave it, and the meaning "to lift name from the things" is about to enter it and fill it.

Now here is a well-known problem which must be briefly mentioned before we can turn to consider this new meaning. Namely the fact that the changes in words and the changes in meanings are two different processes and that they are de-phased with regard to each other. Sometimes, as in the case of the word "art" here considered, the same name can have various meanings in the course of time; and sometimes the same meaning can be expressed, in the course of time, by different terms. For instance: the meaning of the word "sin" in the Middle Ages is probably much closer to the meaning of the word "alienation" as used today than to the meaning of the word "sin" as it is used at present. The problem is this: how are we to understand the meaning of the "sayings of our elders"? If Nietzsche says, to quote an example of some importance to the present considerations: "art is better than truth", we understand his words, to be sure, but do we understand his meaning? Every single word contained in the sentence quoted very probably changed its meaning since it was pronounced, although a mere hundred years separate us from Nietzsche. The problem must be mentioned now, because it will bear on the following reflexions. It is not the difficulty to understand very ancient or very exotic sayings, (like Plato or the Indian sages), which is meant here. This difficulty may be discounted by saying that we can have no true understanding of such utterances. What is meant here is the difficulty to understand our own fathers and grandfathers, because we are separated from them by a revolutionary rupture which has changed both their words and their meanings in a complex and not easily solvable pattern.

Let us return to the new meaning of the term "art" here suggested, more or less in agreement with a general tendency to use it at present. The activity now meant by "art", (the "un-naming of things"), is, of course, the activity of anti-magic, (if by "magic" we understand the evocation and provocation of things through names in the possession of the magician). In all tr

ditions I know of the magic activity of giving names, (and thus "form") to things is considered to be the activity of production, ("poiesis," "creation" "nama-rupa", "information"). To take names away is considered by all traditions I know of, to be destructive, (if it is at all considered). Now "art", in all the traditions I know of and whatever its various meanings, has to do with production. Therefore the new meaning of the word "art" here considered is approximately the meaning of the word "anti-art" in all the traditions I know of, (if such a word existed, as it does not, according to my knowledge). This fact is revealing of our situation, which is one of destruction, (or consumption, or experiencing, or dissolution, or whatever the term). But of course: we mean by "destruction", (or the pleasure principle, or "Gelassenheit"), something different from what our Victorian grandfathers meant by those terms. Nonetheless: when we say "art" we mean approximately the contrary from what they meant, namely anti-magic, de-mythification.

The taking away of names is an activity characteristic of late and tired generations. There is something archaeological to that gesture, like digging for buried treasures or for lost skeletons and fossils. It is the activity of anti-progress: it advances in the direction of the past, of the roots we come from. For being a search of roots, it is a "radical" activity in an etymological, (and therefore strict), sense of that term. For being a search for what has been lost, or forgotten, or covered up, ("repressed" is the appropriate psychoanalytical term), it is a search for "truth", (in the sense of fidelity, and also in the sense of what has to be uncovered). In this, (and other), aspects it is the exact opposite of "artistic activity in the modern sense of the term, (which is progressive, futuristic, and favors phantasy and imagination). The taking away of names is thus a gesture of what might be called a dis-enchanted, (anti-magical), being-in-the-world.

Now this digging activity characterizes our situation for more than two generations, but it was not called "art" until very lately. The feeling that something went lost during history, and that, if it is not found we shall ourselves be lost, is thus not a very new one. It should, however, not be confounded with the Romantic quest for the past, (which was reactionary. and not radical as is ours). At first one did not know what was lost, and thus digged in various places: the subconscious, the biological, ("genetic") information, the history of philosophy and of science. Thus disciplines like psychoanalysis, genetics and phenomenology were elaborated as specific taking away of names, (like "self", and "individual organism", and "subject and object"). But as such names were being taken away, one after another, and as the nameless soup of concrete reality re-appeared under the various layers of names, names of names, and names of nothing, it became more and more evident what had been lost: meaning. It became ever more evident that names mean names, and that so-called "proper names" mean un-names. This digging quest thus turned into an "enquiry into the meaning of meaning".



At first, when it became clear that interest was turning so to speak upon itself and now looked in the opposite direction, it was felt to be a revolution in "pure thinking". But the archaeological character of this turning about of interest, which is a stepping back from oneself and from the world, could not permit it, for very long, to remain "speculative". Although of course the activity of dis-naming is obviously a logical one, and has its first impact on epistemology and through it on science, it involves a change of attitude, and thus of the whole man. And it does so in a way that is a constant re-inforcing. If I am interested in what it means to mean, it is because my whole attitude toward the world and myself is one of retreat from progress. And if I am interested in what it means to mean, I shall become ever more disinterested in first degree meaning. In other words: the archaeological stepping back might look at first as if it were a step in "reflexion", but as it becomes ever more self-reinforced, it shows that it is a step in "existence" What might be called a "style of living". And the moment this became evident, (which was around the middle of this century), it began to be considered to be "art" in the new sense of that term.

Of course: this new understanding of "art" as a way of digging with a view of discovering what hides behind names, was not a sudden event, but it evolved slowly and is not yet fully accepted. When the modern meaning of the word "art" began to grow obsolete, because the lack of meaning of making beautiful things began to dawn on "artists", they still continued to think of themselves as being "artists". Only now it was the feeling of meaninglessness of making beautiful things, and not the making itself that justified that title. Very slowly the feeling of meaninglessness to make beautiful things changed into an activity, a method: instead of making beautiful things, "artists" very slowly began to make things or motions which were a sort of questioning their own meaning. This activity and method was then considered to be one among various "art forms", but an art form with a new meaning. The next step in this evolution was the discovery that to make things which question themselves, and to perform motions which are their own problem, was not an activity characteristic of certain "artists", and thus a symptom of what used to be called, at that time, "the crisis of the arts", but was an activity characteristic of the entire civilisation. All the technological things question themselves, and have thus their meaning within themselves, (which is to say that they are meaningless), and most of the everyday motions we perform are empty gestures. Thus the "artistic" activity was discovered to be, not a special and specialized activity within society, but a model for the general activity going on around the artist. Everybody was so to speak trying to dig for meaning, but the "artist" was doing it with a method. Thus "art" came to mean a model of digging for meaning, and at the same time all previous techniques of the "arts" began to be considered as not being artistic. But such a use of the term "art" still did not have a

very wide consensus. Most would consider those who were dedicated to the search for meaning not as artists at all, but as a sort of misguided scientists, because most still adhered to the modern, and by now ancient, meaning of the word "art".

This is where the matter stood when the second world war had proved, through excellent examples like Auschwitz and Hiroshima, that our main problem is indeed the meaning of meaning. Because the question: "what does Auschwitz mean?" is not a good one, and the obvious question I must ask when facing Auschwitz is: "how can I ask questions concerning Auschwitz?" Which implies that not only is it patently absurd to continue "artistic" activities in the modern sense of the term, but also that to dig for meaning is a job, not for the logician, the philosopher and for the scientist, but for the "artist". Because what I need is not an "explanation of the meaning of meaning", but a model for living in a world where things like Auschwitz and Hiroshima make a mockery of meaning. Thus the second world war, by its overall absurdity, and by the absurdity of its details, contributed to overcome the "crisis of the arts" and to more or less confirm the new meaning of the term "art".

There is, however, a further element which must be considered if one is to understand this new meaning. It is what might be called the painful discovery that the world is not composed of things, but of relations. That discovery, which will have consequences some of which we cannot even imagine yet, is, of course, not very new: it is a consequence of revolutionary changes in the physical and psychological sciences of the turn of the century, and of the consequent change in methods of investigation, now called the "structuralist method". But after the second world war, through what is now called "the media revolution", the discovery that there are no things penetrated so to speak concretely the consciousness of the masses. A new sort of "art" began to characterize the situation, the so-called "mass art", and it was not like modern art, a manipulation of material to result in beautiful things, but a manipulation of material to result in sensational events. The event, the happening, the relationship was the aim of artistic activity, no longer "the work of art", namely a thing. Now this fission of the artistic activity into an "elite art", which still had to do with things, and a "mass art" which already abandoned the concept of the thing, contributed powerfully to the realisation that "art" is an activity, a technique, a method, and not what results from that activity, that method. The "media revolution" showed that the world is not composed of things, because it showed that it is the sensational events which compose the world. And it also showed that meaning is a central problem, because the sensational events of mass media art are obviously a cover-up for the problem. Thus "art" came to mean a digging for meaning against the cover-up of mass media, but like them in a non-objective world.